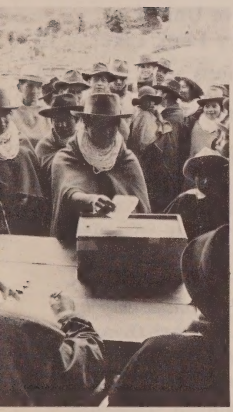
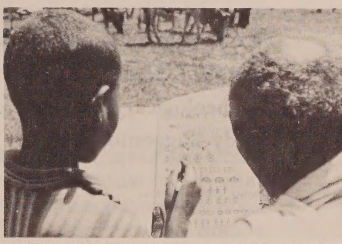
# Human Rights for Today

**by Peggy Billings**





And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? . . . . first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.

*Matthew 7:3-5*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ..... 3
What Must We Do? ..... 5
*We have to put RIGHTS back together* ... 5
*We can become part of a global constituency* ..... 8
*We can develop political support for realistic policies* ..... 10
What Would A Constructive United States Human Rights Policy Look Like? .. 12
Certain Ethical Considerations ..... 13
A Theological Question ..... 14
Study Suggestions ..... 16

*Photos: United Nations*

*Peggy M. Billings, formerly a missionary in South Korea (1952-63), is Assistant General Secretary of the Section of Christian Social Relations of the Women's Division, Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. She serves as chairperson of the North American Coalition for Human Rights in Korea.*

Produced by cooperating denominations of the International Affairs Inter-unit Working Group of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

## Introduction

The year is 1977. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is now twenty-nine years old. As each year has passed, the prospect for universal acceptance of human rights as governing law and policy of nations has dimmed. Forces of oppression have grown stronger and more ruthless in the past decade in what appears to involve cooperation among certain nation-states. The more the world's leaders have talked about human rights, the more elusive those rights have become.

These words would not have been written in so somber a fashion had this booklet been prepared at the beginning of 1977. Newly elected President Carter had caught the attention of the United States and the rest of the world with his solemn, stirring pledge to work for human rights as one of the main corner-stones of his administration's foreign policy.

The new President's words made that cold January day seem like spring to countless thousands of people. Good news, too, travels fast. Jimmy Carter's promise found its way to prison cells stretching from Uruguay to Korea, to slum homes from Recife to New York City.

"Human Rights" became a household phrase. It was suddenly news. Nationally-syndicated columnists debated various approaches to the problem in the nation's foreign affairs. Most citizens seemed refreshed by the new President's determination to base policy on the "ideals of the American people."

Hardened as we had become by the cynicism of the Watergate years, we watched our new President move from rhetoric to action, and we cheered him on. His first major act, a personal letter replying to Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov, went by diplomatic pouch from Washington to Moscow and was hand-delivered by a US representative. News wires hummed.

In South Korea only a few weeks after Jimmy Carter's election, I felt the excitement and quiet satisfaction of the Koreans who hoped, prayed and worked for a change in the iron-handed rule of President Park Chung Hee. We rejoiced together, assured that President-elect Carter and his new administration would help create conditions which would make possible a return to constitutional democracy and basic civil and political liberties in that troubled land.

When the Sakharov letter was made public, those of us who work through the North American Coalition for Human Rights in Korea doubled our efforts to secure a similar initiative on South Korea. Other groups made similar efforts in behalf of struggling people in the Philippines, in Brazil, Chile, Uruguay . . . the list went on . . .

No more letters came from the White House. Instead, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was the messenger; the occasion was a message to Congress. The news was not good. The Secretary declared that certain countries, and he mentioned South Korea by name, would be exempt from heavy,

overt pressure from the United States to make their human rights policies more acceptable. Such pressures would not be exerted in these cases because of "security reasons."

When I read the report of Secretary Vance's speech, I recalled the basic conclusions of the Consultation which had recently taken me to South Korea. Christian friends living there under the daily threat of their own repressive government and the reality of a very hardened regime to the north, had agreed that the issue of "security," as serious as it was, could no longer stand as a reason for denial of human rights. They said they were willing to take whatever risks were necessary to secure those basic rights which give dignity to life. For without those rights, the promise of "national security" would carry as much water as a broken gourd.

After Mr. Vance's speech, I was obsessed with the memory of other things I had witnessed in Seoul: People who loved their country and had tried to serve her being hauled before tribunals which make mockeries of the concept of a fair trial and of equal justice before the law. I had also read an account of the physical and psychological torture of women in Chile. I had heard renewed reports of those in other places who had simply disappeared on their way to work and were never heard from again.

The euphoria vanished. Success in the struggle for human rights does not come easily. For concerns such as these, there is no Camelot.

## What Must We Do?

1. *We have to put RIGHTS back together.* The most vexing problem in interpreting human rights is the false division between CIVIL and POLITICAL rights on

one hand and ECONOMIC, SOCIAL and CULTURAL rights on the other. Civil and political rights (freedom of speech and assembly, of religion, of movement, even the right to leave one's own country) are precious rights and our goal should be for all people to enjoy them. Freedom from hunger, the right to education, the right to one's own cultural heritage, and the right to self-determination are also precious rights which all people should enjoy.

We have learned that it is not good *to interpret the range of human rights too narrowly*. Perhaps it is unrealistic to except countries to provide a full measure of all rights at all times. It is, however, certain that our long-term goal must be inclusive of them all.

Adding to the difficulty is the fact that the United States and the Soviet Union as well as other nations have emphasized this division in their world-wide political struggle. The United States has given supremacy to individual rights as guaranteed by our Constitution and Bill of Rights. The Soviets have stressed group rights. Each has taken every opportunity to embarrass the other with accusations of denials of human rights as defined by these differing national standards.

We have reached the point where many persons are convinced that there are two "kinds" of rights and that there is a basic incompatability between them, that a nation has to choose one or the other. History, in assessing what led humanity forward or backward during this period, may well record that the politics of the Cold War left permanent scars on the body politic. What a tragedy it will be if the present renewal of interest in human rights is used to re-fuel the Cold War!

It may be helpful to review the context in which delegates on the first Human Rights

Commission of the United Nations did their work in order to understand how this false division of human rights occurred. Working amidst the emotional and physical rubble of World War II, idealists were able to put forward long-dormant dreams for new international institutions. One of these, the United Nations, fit the policy objectives of the Western Allies, especially the strongest member, the United States.

But the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union quickly gained center stage at the United Nations. In the United States the climate was saturated with anti-communism. Rational public discussion of the two systems was impossible. Patriotic Americans were against communism and all it stood for, and that was the end of it. In the Soviet Union, patriotic Russians were against capitalistic imperialism and all it stood for, and that was the end of that.

It was probably true that "all it stood for" was never understood because study was not allowed. Genuine choices offered by the two systems were never objectively explored. The political struggles of that era still haunt public discussion in this country.

In those days, proposals advanced by one side were fought bitterly by the other. Even a stateswoman as internationally minded as Eleanor Roosevelt worked within that context. Speaking in 1952 as the United States representative on the Commission on Human Rights, she said, "Neither of the Covenants as now drafted contains any provisions which depart from the American way of life in the direction of communism, socialism, syndicatism, or statism. When such provisions have been proposed, the United States has opposed them; every proposal by the Soviet Union and its satellites to write 'statism' into the Covenant has been defeated . . . "

The Human Rights Commission had divided an earlier single draft of the "Covenant on Human Rights" into two covenants. One dealt with Civil and Political Rights. The other covered Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The request for two covenants rather than a unified one came from the General Assembly where the United States, at that time, controlled the majority of the votes.

Today, the climate of power politics has changed enough to force a respite called "detente." Yet some fear that detente is threatened when human rights are stressed. Thus, the artificial division of rights into personal rights and group rights continues to frustrate achievements in this field.

2. *We can become part of a global constituency for human rights.* Human rights *do* have substance and meaning, and therefore are policy objectives which *can* be implemented. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, approved by the General Assembly on December 10, 1948, was drafted not as a treaty, a binding instrument, but as a declaration of ideals. In contrast, the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights with the Optional Protocol (which came into force on January 3 and March 23, 1976, respectively after ratification by 38 governments) *are* binding instruments of international law. The ten year process of ratification by enough governments to bring the covenants into force signifies that many member states of the United Nations have been responding to the growing world concern for human rights.

But when the first meeting of the Human Rights Committee composed of States Party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights convened at UN Headquarters on September 20, 1976, the United States was not among those who

heard the congratulatory remarks of Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim. The covenants have not been ratified by the United States. In all, the United States has not ratified fifteen of the human rights instruments which give legal status to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

During the course of the two decades when other states were working the conventions through their governmental processes, concerned citizens of the United States contended with two contradictory myths in the mind-set of those who shaped our national policies.

First, it was said that it was not necessary for the United States to ratify international covenants inasmuch as rights guaranteed by our Constitution were already superior to those enjoyed by others, and besides, such international treaties might infringe on our national sovereignty.

Second, it was said that it was not necessary to ratify international covenants because we respect the guarantees they contain anyhow, and that many states which do ratify have no real intent to comply.

For those who think that human rights bear the stamp "Made in the USA," it will come as a rude awakening to know that many countries no longer regard us as leaders in the field. The failure of the United States to ratify the covenants and conventions has weakened our position considerably from what it was when the Universal Declaration was approved in 1948.

In his speech in the General Assembly hall on March 19, 1977, President Carter announced his intention for the U.S. to complete the ratification process for the two international convenants on human rights, for the Genocide Convention (which was submitted to the Senate over twenty-five years ago) and for the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial

Discrimination.

Ratification of these treaties would signify that the United States again is willing to take a leadership role in the struggle for human rights. If we, as individuals and as congregations, are serious about the task, our first obligation is to support the efforts of the Administration to change our condescending attitude toward international efforts into genuine cooperation.

Concerned people in the churches have the opportunity to help rally support as citizens for the needed votes in the Senate as the long-delayed ratification process proceeds. We are challenged to help create a global constituency for a global task. Human rights are not safe for the people of any one nation unless they are guaranteed to the people of all nations. Our concern for human rights crosses all boundaries of nation, language, race, sex, age, culture and creed. As we work for human rights, understand their meaning, and implement them in our home society we are citizens of the world, in fact. Andrew Young, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, has said "This country changes when the churches change." Are the churches ready to support the struggle for human rights?

3. *We can develop political support for realistic policies.* Most work for human rights takes place in political arenas where compromise is necessary, where objectives cannot be fully achieved because the circumstances are not completely under control. In such cases, to expect consistency would be, as Hobbes once put it, "the hobgoblin of little minds."

This does not mean that policies can be capricious; that we can denounce a practice in one country and condone it in ourselves or another. No, there must be an underlying *moral consistency* even though tactics and strategies may vary.

We observe that governments give up too easily in some situations, and fail to act at all in others. Officials beg off with a plea for "flexibility." Flexibility in the administration of human rights policy is all right if that is indeed what is happening. But too often "flexibility" is a code-word for doing nothing, and is an indication of lack of coherence in the formulation, coordination and implementation of policy.

*Cooperation* is also essential. Very little can be gained from national "finger-pointing." Each country has enough to be ashamed of. If it is true that nobody loves the town bully, it is also true that nobody loves the town "goody-goody" who is holier than all others. Allard Lowenstein, United States representative on the United Nations Human Rights Commission, was quoted to this effect in the May, 1977, issue of the *Interdependent,* the newspaper of the United Nations Association. He said, "No government comes with clean hands to this question. Nobody ought to be pointing fingers as if there's some absolute standard to which everyone must adhere,... You find areas of cooperation where you can agree, . . . You're firm and you're cooperative and you try to understand other people's viewpoints . . . "

This approach is one which reasonable people can support and promote. There are those issues—racism in general and genocide and apartheid in particular—where the collective conscience of the world has been unanimous in its expression of abhorence. Such unanimity should be expressed, not only in words but in deeds. But, where there is no such unanimity, we must press our various viewpoints with the hope and confidence that the debate will expand our vision and the areas of agreement.

One serious obstacle to the promotion of human rights internationally can be re-

moved by a more realistic policy: The lack of machinery for the implementation of complaints of human rights violations received by the United Nations. This weakness causes many people to question the seriousness of the United Nations and the member states which sit on the Human Rights Commission.

At present, there are unconscionable delays in complaint procedures. The record on implementation is abysmal. If changes can be made here, the entire procedure will gain credibility. No one can deny the great accomplishment of the Human Rights Commission in defining the basic substance of universal human rights. It was a lonely, little-appreciated struggle. Nor can anyone deny the contribution made by the United Nation's promotion of these basic rights among its member states. But the tougher battle of implementation still lies ahead of us, and we must grasp the nettle.

## What Would A Constructive United States Human Rights Policy Look Like?

1. It would be *global.* Policy objectives to achieve domestic human rights should receive top priority. What a nation does is as important as what a nation says. At the same time, most efforts to improve human rights in other nations should be carried out through international organizations such as the United Nations. Aspirations of all persons are heightened by these means.

2. It would be *inclusive.* Collective and systemic denials of human rights would receive attention as well as denials of the rights of individuals. Gross abuses of groupings of people or nationalities are difficult to document and may not be as dramatic as the case of a well-known individual, but all

efforts must be made to oppose such violations.

3. It would be *integrated.* The basic world problem of control of economic power and resources must be faced squarely. This question of "development" is basic to any discussion of human rights. If new political, social and economic agreements are not formulated which have meaning for developed and developing nations alike, the struggle for human rights will mean little.

4. It would be *open.* A constructive policy would offer more opportunities for input from competent non-governmental organizations and groups such as churches. This broader vision can be a *refining/enriching/correcting* influence in inter-governmental debates and relationships.

5. It would be *realistic.* Stages of development vary, and what governments are able to offer their people at a given time may be limited (for instance, in education or housing). The same is true with issues of national security. But the general movement toward respect for the dignity of persons must not be compromised. The intent and general direction of a country's policy as well as its acts need to be taken into account.

6. It must be *implemented.* Broad statements of concern must be transformed into policies and into machinery which will coordinate and implement them. Coordination is necessary if a policy is to succeed.

## Certain Ethical Considerations

The claim of human rights has its opposite coin in the constrait of responsibility: we are responsible for the manner in which we relate to other human beings. We are responsible for the way we live in the world and use its limited resources. A demand for "rights" without the accompanying willing-

ness and opportunity to work for the common good is corrosive of the common good, demeaning the very rights we seek to enjoy. However, the word "opportunity" must be stressed. Oppressed groups are often expected to be "responsible" when the means do not exist for them to participate equally in working for the common good.

Equal participation means that people will have access to the arenas of decision-making. Up to now, our world has been shaped by the idea that "might makes right." Future survival depends on the recognition of the right of all peoples to participate in decisions concerning the use of limited and finite resources.

We are not there yet. Developed nations often accept the verbal aspirations of developing countries so long as they are sure that they, the rich countries, have final control of the economic lever. But when the possibility of equal power among rich and poor alike arises (as in UN Law of the Sea Conference proposals for the use of the resources of the ocean floor) the rich nations act differently.

A new ethic must be born. We live in the midst of possibility, when changes are in motion which are so profound that we must call them evolutionary. Naturally, they are difficult if not impossible to see. But, there are glimpses of them.

## A Theological Question

Finally, the hardest question of all remains for those of us who call ourselves Christians. Can we who believe that life is a gift lived by grace speak of "rights" at all?

No "code of conduct" or standard of behavior has been laid down in Scripture which would "guarantee" rights to anyone or require anyone to guarantee rights to others in a legal sense. There is little sup-

port in Scripture for "demands." Certainly, there are rules: the "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots" of the Ten Commandments.

Two basic beliefs give some frame of reference. One is the belief in the pre-existent love of God, the Logos, the Word which antecedes creation and history; this love of God plays an active role in the world. We are invited to live our lives in a purposeful, not a capricious, world under God's goodness and love.

The second belief is that we find a practical example of how this love looks in human affairs in the life of Jesus. His life is the source of faith and he invites us to follow with him. As the teachings and example of Jesus show, the way we are invited to follow is the way of the cross. In other words, we are invited to become "victim." We are enabled to show such love for others only because we have first experienced such love ourselves. (See I John 4:19.) We can minister to others only because we have experienced the grace of being ministered to.

The source of "human rights," then, for the Christian, is not in the commandments of law, neither scriptural nor legal. When the need of one's neighbor is seen, the response of the Christian is immediate and uncalculated, for Christians know themselves to be recipients of daily grace and mercy.

We are free to love because we have been so loved. This is the "law" which Christians believe directs the world, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. When someone is lying near death in the ditch, we go to help not because of that person's rights, but because we know what it means to be beaten and left for dead, and then to be saved.

## Study Suggestions

This booklet can be used as a sourcebook for presentations on, or for study of, human rights. It is designed to enable your group to discover:

**What are human rights** *(hear)*
**Where are human rights being violated** *(understand)*
**How to speak out for human rights** *(identify-act)*

Form a planning group of interested persons to plan how best to involve persons in this study. Decide:

1. What are your purposes, goals?
2. How many sessions?
3. Where will they be held?
4. When?
5. For how long?
6. Who will take leadership responsibility?

Remember, persons will come to the group from different levels of understanding about human rights. You should plan to begin where most of the people are beginning. Be flexible. The text is designed as a starter. Persons may bring their own materials to the group.

Part of EACH of the following four sections (hear, understand, identify, act) should be included in your session(s). Each section builds on the other. Therefore, choose ideas from each section for your study. If the time is more than one session, have each participant read the entire booklet, "Human Rights for Today." If it is only one session, divide into four groups. Have each group read only one of the following sections: Beginning on pages 5, 8, 10, and 13. All persons should read the Introduction and the section beginning on page 12 (What Would A Constructive United States Human Rights Policy Look Like?).

Use the following sections as a guide to discussion:

## I. HEAR

A. Use the photos and scripture on the bulletin insert as discussion starters (smaller copy on brochure cover).

B. Discuss what is meant by "human rights."

C. Review the history as given in the first sections of the booklet. What can we learn from our past?

D. What has been the role of the United States and the United Nations in the process? What role should the United Nations take in the future?

E. Have available recent issues of news magazines, newspapers, etc. What recent happenings about human rights do they report? Analyze their reporting in the light of information from the booklet.

F. Secure the statement on Human Rights from your denomination—discuss.

## II. UNDERSTAND

A. Discuss the statement about "National Security" on page 5.

B. Discuss the "myths" on page 9. Where can you personally have an effect in solving human rights violations?

C. Design a symbol, banner, cartoon, etc., to say what you feel about human rights.

D. Study Luke 4:16-31 as a basis for a just policy. Discuss.

E. Do you agree with the argument on page 11 that a coherent policy toward human rights concerns is more desirable than an inflexible policy?

## III. IDENTIFY

A. List as many violations of human rights as you can identify in your own community, your state and your nation (such as unequal health care for the poor). Ask a task force to do research for further examples, to discover if rights are being observed/violated.

B. List as many human rights violations as you can identify in the world. Ask a task force to do research for further examples.

C. List goals for a United States human rights

policy. Compare with the standards listed in the section of the booklet on a constructive United States human rights policy.

D. Write a position statement for your church on human rights. Compare with your denomination's position.

## IV. ACTION

A. Using the research from your investigation into human rights in your community, strategize and carry out actions to assure change.

B. Do further work in understanding the four covenants and conventions now at the forefront of US ratification efforts (International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Genocide Convention and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Strategize ways to help in the ratification by meeting with Senators when in their home offices, writing your feelings, calling their offices, etc.

C. Maintain contact with IMPACT, 110 Maryland Avenue, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002, for recent congressional action on ratification or other human rights concerns.

D. Write for information on human rights to the CALC Human Rights Program, 1114 G Street, S.E., Washington, D.C. 20003.

E. For information on church positions and action for human rights, contact your denominational office or the International Affairs/ Human Rights office of the National Council of Churches, 475 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y. 10027.

*Order from:*

Service Department
100 Maryland Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002

Order No. P-135. 30¢ each; $2 for 8; $10 per 100.